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ABSTRACT

Vietnam War literature offers students a unique mix of themes which in many ways speak directly to them as, perhaps, no other literature is able to. This literature can help them better understand literature, history, the world they live in, and themselves, as well as the Vietnam War. A sequence of classroom activities (beginning with an "oppinionnaire," to introduce themes and interpretive problems), with accompanying materials, shows how literature on the Vietnam War can be successfully integrated in the university-level English classroom, helping students learn how to analyze and write about literature. A student essay is the final activity and calls for an analysis of character and effective use of evidence and explanation of evidence to support the student writer's viewpoint. (A bibliography of critical works on Vietnam War literature, appendixes containing examples of classroom activities, and the student "opinionnaire" are attached.) (KEH)

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VIETNAM IN THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM

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Vietnam in the English Classroom

Larry R. Johannessen

National Council of Teachers of English 1989 Spring Conference

Charleston, South Carolina

8 April 1989

For many people, Vietnam War literature like the war itself is a dark, ugly blotch, a kind of jungle rot, on the great traditions of American literature. In fact, Philip Caputo, author of *A Rumor of War*--one of the works which many critics believe will likely become a classic--says that "too often, Vietnam War fiction and memoir has been viewed as a dark and exotic tributary of the American literary mainstream."

Let me give you just one example: in November 1983, in the *Los Angeles Times*, Elaine Kendall compared the novels of the Vietnam War with World War I and World War II novels. In her article, she describes the now familiar patterns and themes of the classic war novels and says, "Don't expect any of these amenities in Vietnam novels. Like the war they relive, these books do not fit the established mold. Like that war, they are bewildering, savage, irrational, horrific and unresolved." Yes, this is true I answer, but when I examined the criticism of Vietnam War literature, I found that, as Caputo says, "its headwaters begin with Crane, Melville, and Cooper, and that it is as much a part of our national literature as the works of Heller, Mailer, and Hemingway."

Okay, if it is "a part of our national literature," how do we get it into the English classroom? My answer is that contrary to what critics like

Kendall might assert, Vietnam War literature offers students a unique mix of themes which in many ways speak directly to them as, perhaps, no other literature is able to, and it can help them better understand literature, history, the world they live in, and themselves, as well as the Vietnam War.

No other literature presents characters whose views of the world and of war have been so influenced and molded by the media. As C. D. B. Bryan (1984) points out, "myths and media images had formed [the soldiers'] ideas about war. They went to Vietnam as innocents" and idealists (70-71). In a similar manner, our students come to us today molded by what I call Ramboesque and China Beach Party myths and shoot-'em-up images that have *not* been challenged. Vietnam War literature can teach them the dangers of believing in those images and myths.

Our students often believe in their own invincibility, in the limitless potential of technology, and in their own and America's seemingly unlimited power. The literature of Vietnam can teach them as John Clark Pratt (1987) notes: "the naiveté of Americans who want to do it all and who become viciously destructive in their attempts; the belief by the Vietnamese that the Americans are all-powerful; the debilitating loss of traditional values *on all sides* as the war escalates; the failure of modern technology to conquer a people who are determined to fulfill what they are told is their destiny; the degrading effect of the war on a proud U. S. military; how the Americans' belief in individuality changes to a sense of being part of an unstoppable, impersonal machine; the overwhelming effect of the Vietnam War on the American scene itself; and the inability, regardless of political, moral, or even religious beliefs, for American novelists to make sense out of the madness that creates wars such as Vietnam in the modern, 'civilized' world" (153).

For those students who might have romanticized the Vietnam War and war itself, there is Bryan's reminder that "the voice of Vietnam literature is that of a barely suppressed scream. There is an intensity to these books similar to that which pervades the literature of the Holocaust" (71). How else does one cope with a war "fought for no other cause," as Philip Caputo wrote in *A Rumor of War*, other than for one's own survival. And how can students continue to romanticize it when author after author writes of a war in which "Our mission was not to win terrain or seize positions, but simply to kill" (Caputo, *Rumor*). The cliché that "war is hell" takes on a different meaning when as Bryan says, "The arithmetic of war required that if it moved, you killed it; if you killed it, you counted it; if you counted it, it had to have been Vietcong" (70).

Finally, there is the inevitable fact that the Vietnam War has become the symbol for the modern war. For example, in virtually every media story dealing with the war in Afghanistan, Vietnam was mentioned somewhere. Even Russian soldiers who were interviewed when they were being withdrawn talked about the Afghan War as being Russia's Vietnam. Perhaps, studying the literature of the Vietnam War, the symbol of the modern war, could help our students avoid some of the mistakes that led our generation into a war that just won't go away.

The themes I have mentioned so far are just a sampling. The classroom activity I will now show you indicates how I introduce these and other themes to students as they begin to examine some of the literature of the Vietnam War.

STUDENT OPINIONNAIRE

One way to introduce and help prepare students for some of the themes that they will be studying in a particular work or unit is with the student opinionnaire. If you'll turn to the first page of your handout (Appendix, pages 17-18), you will find the opinionnaire that I use to introduce my unit. The opinionnaire is based on a simple idea. Students have opinions about various subjects; it uses those opinions to create interest in a work of literature and helps with problems students will encounter in trying to interpret themes and character. In this case, it is keyed to issues that appear in much of the Vietnam War literature and in particular the short stories I'll be discussing, some poetry, the film "Letters from Vietnam," Oliver Stone's "Platoon," *Nam* by Marc Baker, and *Fields of Fire*, and various people and characters that appear in these works.

I think it is important here to point out why I use James Webb's *Fields of Fire* in my unit rather than one of the other excellent novels. In the first place, as Pratt notes, "it is one of the few novels that moves realistically from the home scene (1968-69) to Vietnam and back home again (1970)" (146) and because as you will see later when I discuss character analysis, it offers an unusual opportunity for examining the effect of war on various characters.

The first step in using the opinionnaire is to hand it out to the class perhaps the day before they start reading the first selection. Have students mark whether they agree or disagree with each of the sixteen statements. Then, lead a class discussion focusing on each statement, and encourage students to express their opinions and challenge the views of others. Most often, a lively discussion ensues.

Once students have discussed all the statements, I point out that they deal with themes and characters in the literature they are about to read and

that they should keep them in mind as they read. In fact, Statements #9--"The Vietnam War was a guerrilla war; therefore, it is understandable that Vietnamese civilians suffered or were wounded or killed as a result of American military actions" and #16 "Most American soldiers participated in acts of brutality against Vietnamese civilians"--are keyed to an important issue that occurs in much of the literature, the attrocity, or, stated another way, the senseless brutality that became a part of the war. This is at issue in three short stories I often use in my unit ("We Have Met the Enemy" by Robin Moore, "Centurion" by Tim O'Brien, and "Ben" by George Davis), in "Platoon," and in *Fields of Fire*. In later discussions, you can refer back to how students responded on the opinionnaire and they can compare their responses to what they find in their reading.

Notice that some statements are keyed to some of the typical stereotypes many students have about the war. For example, statement #5 is keyed to the issue of the role of women in the Vietnam war. Many students are very surprised to discover that women not only served in Vietnam, but just like men were wounded, killed, and suffered aftereffects as a result of the war.

This activity links student attitudes and opinions to the themes and characters in the literature. It provides a context--a place to start--for understanding the themes, how authors treat them, and understanding characters, their actions and their motivations.

A glance at the statements on the sheet indicates other important issues introduced through the activity. For example, statement #7--"The soldier, above all other people, prays for peace, for he must suffer and bear the deepest wounds and scars of war"--is a quote by General Douglas MacArthur. Statement #13 is also interesting for personal reasons. In 1968,

a few months after I got back from Vietnam, my mother sent me a newspaper article about a buddy of mine that I had joined the Marines with. He had served with the 5th Marines, was wounded three times, and was awarded the Bronze Star for heroism. It seems that when he came home, his family hung up banners and invited people over to welcome him home. He got out of the car and without a word to anyone hobbled up to the front porch on his crutches--the legacy of his third purple heart and Bronze Star, tore the banner down, and told the 20 or so people there that he didn't deserve a hero's welcome. "The only heroes in war," he said, "are the dead ones."

His statement suggests many of the themes that emerge in the literature: the issue of loss of innocence, the devastating physical and perhaps psychological effects of the war on those who served, the questioning of traditional values, the search or quest for America, and echoes of the strong bond of brotherhood forged under fire. As you can see, this opinionnaire establishes a wide range of themes dealt with in Vietnam War literature.

The opinionnaire can be easily modified to fit the specific works of literature you are teaching and themes you want to emphasize.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

I have included a bibliography of some critical works on Vietnam War literature, some of which I have invoked here today. It is by no means complete. I used three criteria in compiling the list: I picked sources that (1) I thought would be most useful to classroom teachers, (2) seemed to offer

at least something insightful regarding Vietnam War literature, and (3) were most readily available.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS SEQUENCE

As I said before, many of our students come to us with a very limited understanding of war and the Vietnam War in particular. The activities that I am going to show you can help students come to a more sophisticated understanding. The sequence of activities involving character analysis I will now show you is designed to be used with James Webb's *Fields of Fire*. The activities are set up to engage students in an interpretive problem, help them make complex interpretations, and enable them to transform their conclusions into effective literary analysis. The activities can be easily modified to use with other works of literature. In fact, "Ben" by George Davis and "Young Man in Vietnam" by Charles Coe--two of the short stories I use in my unit--also work very well for the activities I am going to show you.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

As I indicated before, I begin with the opinionnaire as a means of introducing and preparing students for themes and some of the interpretive problems they will encounter in their reading. The next activity is designed to help students analyze a character's values. In your handout (Appendix, page 19) you will find a sheet labelled "Character Analysis." One of the things I want to illustrate here is how I use the activity to focus on the three major characters in the novel, Snake, Hodges, and Senator.

As you can see from the sheet, this activity gives students a list of 22 values that they must rank for a particular character. They rank the character's most important and least important values early in a work and at or near the end. Making these rankings requires students to make complex inferences. They must consider and weigh many possibilities. In making their choices and later arguing with peers, students practice supporting and explaining their conclusions with evidence from the novel.

When you first hand this out to students, you will probably have to go over and define difficult terms such as *aesthetics* and *altruism*. Then, have students rank the character's values.

Fortunately, Webb structures his novel so that you can have students work on what each character's values are early in the work (the first column) either one at a time as he introduces each character or after students have read the first hundred and twenty pages or so. Webb introduces the character of Snake first, then Hodges, followed by Senator.

I like to do the activity after all three characters have been introduced. So, once students have read far enough into the novel and after you have gone over the terms, have students complete their individual rankings for each character early in the work. Then, put students in small groups and have them try to reach a consensus. As students discuss their rankings in small groups, they make some interesting discoveries about the main characters. For example, they quickly learn that each character is motivated by very different values.

Also, by ranking each character's values, they make some other discoveries. For example, some students rank "morality" as Senator's top value because he refuses to shoot anyone whom he is not absolutely convinced is the enemy. Of course, other students suggest different top

values. They sometimes suggest "health," arguing that he is most concerned with his own survival. In discussing their rankings students find specific and concrete ways to talk about the actions and motives of a character, and they are practicing making and supporting conclusions. As students debate possible values, they reach a fuller understanding of each character.

After students reach a consensus in their small groups, I have them debate their ideas in a whole class discussion. As the groups compare answers and discuss why they ranked a character's values the way they did, the discussion is at a high level because of their previous work. Students have progressed from making their own decisions independently to refining those ideas and challenging others in small groups and finally debating their conclusions with the whole class.

Doing this activity early in the novel provides students with a basis for talking about characters and their development as they read the novel. My experience has been that as a result the level of analysis during discussions is much higher.

Once students have finished reading the novel, I have them do the activity again for one or more of the characters. This time they rank each character's values at or near the end of the novel. One of their interesting discoveries involves the character of Senator. When they did the activity early in the novel, as I mentioned earlier, some students ranked "health," or his own own personal survival, as one of Senator's top values and "loyalty" as one of his least important values because he doesn't care about the other men in his squad; rather, he is only concerned about saving himself.

However, when they rank his values at the end of the novel, after he has returned from Vietnam, students often put "loyalty" as one of his most important values and "health" as one of his least important values. In other

words, students discover how and why a character has changed as a result of his experiences in war.

EVIDENCE EXTRACT

Many students do not understand what is meant when a writing assignment asks them to supply supporting evidence for their conclusions. They think a statement such as "Senator refuses to fire his rifle at people who may not be enemy soldiers" is enough supporting evidence to show that morality is one of his important values. The activity on the next page of your handout (Appendix, pages 20 and 21) is designed to help students learn to use specific quotations and details from a literary work as supporting evidence for their conclusions.

The "Evidence Extract" activity sheet begins with a possible thesis statement--one written by a past student: "Early in *Fields of Fire*, Hodges values honor (to the warrior culture he grew up a part of) above all else." The next line explains that this student ranked "Honor"--from the "Character Analysis" sheet--as Hodges' # 1 value early in the novel. Part A of the activity directs students to examine the nine possible pieces of supporting evidence and determine which would provide specific and persuasive evidence to support the thesis and which would not.

While you could have students do this on their own, it usually works best to have them work in small groups. Once they have finished Part A, I lead a whole class discussion focusing on their findings. Students begin to see what makes good evidence as they present and discuss their ideas. For example, if a group says that #9 is good evidence another group will point

out that while this quote is very specific, it has nothing to do with the thesis and therefore is not persuasive.

Once the class has discussed each example and is clear about which ones are specific and persuasive and which are not, I usually send them back to their small groups to do part B. This step reinforces what they have just learned about evidence. They must now find evidence to support another important value for Hodges early in the novel. Then, if the class is most of the way through the book, I have them do parts C and D. It asks them to write a thesis for what Hodges values most at or near the end of the novel and find supporting evidence for that value.

Students often decide that by the end of the novel Hodges' most important value is loyalty to the men in his platoon. Students are learning about how war--the Vietnam War--affected or changed those who fought it. They are also learning how to analyze a character in a literary work and how to support their interpretations.

WARRANT WORKOUT

As we all know, our students are mystified when we ask them to explain the evidence they present to support their conclusions. They often think that their evidence "speaks for itself." This next activity, "Warrant Workout," builds on the previous activity because students learn how to link their evidence to their conclusions.

The activity asks students to examine five pieces of evidence that support the thesis that Senator's top value is morality during his tour of duty in Vietnam. Note that the activity sheet (Appendix, page 22) models how to introduce evidence in writing. More importantly, the evidence has been

selected carefully. The examples *could* support the thesis, but the explanation is essential if students are going to link the evidence to the thesis. For example, the first piece of evidence requires that students explain how refusing to fire at a group of fleeing enemy soldiers dressed as women and children supports the idea that Senator values morality.

I usually have students write their explanations in small groups. Then, they present their explanations in a class discussion. What comes out in the discussion is that the examples need explanation and that an explanation like "This example shows that Senator values morality" is inadequate. Students realize that they need to explain *how* their evidence supports a conclusion. They see why the evidence alone does not necessarily support a conclusion.

The task at the bottom of the page shows how this activity relates to the previous activity. It asks them to provide explanation for the evidence they found in the "Evidence Extract" activity.

COMPOSITION PLANNING SHEET

Once students have practiced the skills involved in analyzing a character and convincing a reader of their conclusions, they should be ready for a more independent activity in which they must apply the skills they have learned in previous activities.

When they have finished the novel, I pass out the next page of your handout, the "Composition Planning Sheet" (Appendix, pages 23 and 24). The sheet contains an assignment that asks students to select one of the main characters in the novel, Hodges, Snake, or Senator, and write a composition in which they are to explain how the character's values change and why. It

suggests how their thesis might focus on the character's top value at the beginning of the novel, his top value at the end, and the reasons for the change in values.

Note that the planning sheet asks students to do the character analysis for the character they select. Once students determine the character's values at the beginning and at or near the end of the novel, they fill out the planning sheet. Besides finding evidence and providing reasoning to support their analysis of the character's values, there is a place on the back side of the sheet to present evidence and reasoning for the causes of the change in values.

Once students have completed the sheet, have them write their compositions, or if you think they need a bit more help, you might have them meet in small groups to critique planning sheets before they write their papers.

If you are including independent reading in your unit, for this final assignment you might have students write an analysis like this for a major character in their reading selection.

In this activity students are applying in a more independent writing situation the analytical and writing strategies that have been the focus of the sequence of activities.

COMPOSITION CHECK SHEET

The next page of your handout (Appendix, page 25) contains a check sheet that you might want to use for peer evaluation and revision. The sheet is set up so that you can have students critique one another's rough drafts using the questions as a guide. The questions focus on the skills that

students have learned in previous activities and are designed so that students only have to give a yes or no response to most of the questions. The idea here is that it takes some of the pressure off when students sometimes have difficulty critiquing one another's writing.

I usually put students in small groups and have them read their rough drafts to the group. As they read, I have the group fill out a check sheet on each paper. At the end of the reading, I tell students to look over their checksheets and make the corrections and improvements the group has indicated. I then give them an opportunity to revise their compositions.

"MEMORIES OF DAYS GONE BY"--STUDENT ESSAY--CONCLUSION

The next page of your handout (Appendix, pages 26-29) contains a student paper on the character of Senator. While I don't have time to go over the student essay with you now, you may want to take a look at it on your own. The essay shows a sophisticated analysis of the character and an effective use of evidence and explanation of evidence to support the student's viewpoint. In short, the student essay illustrates how using a sequence of activities like I have shown you here today can help students learn how to analyze and write about literature. More importantly, it illustrates that the literature of the Vietnam War does have a place in the English classroom. After students have completed a unit like the one I have shown you, they have a much more sophisticated understanding of the Vietnam War and the literature about the war. War, too, is no longer a vague abstraction, a China Beach Party myth or Ramboesque shoot-'em-up image, but rather a very real possibility with consequences that they had never before imagined.

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APPENDIX

STUDENT ACTIVITY SHEETS

Patriotism, Protest, and War Opinionnaire

	Agree or Disagree
1. It is never right to kill another person.	_____
2. People should never compromise their ideals or beliefs.	_____
3. "Cowards die many times before their deaths; the valiant taste of death but once."	_____
4. Rambo is a good image for Americans to have of the Vietnam veteran; he represents all that America stands for and the American soldier in war.	_____
5. Women have very little to do with war; they do not fight and suffer very little.	_____
6. No cause, political or otherwise, is worth dying for.	_____
7. "The soldier, above all other people, prays for peace, for he must suffer and bear the deepest wounds and scars of war."	_____
8. "My country right or wrong" is not just a slogan; it is every citizens' patriotic duty.	_____
9. The Vietnam War was a guerrilla war; therefore, it is understandable that Vietnamese civilians suffered or were wounded or killed as a result of American military actions.	_____
10. Movies like Rambo are very bad because they show a distorted view of what war is really like and of what it is like to be a soldier.	_____
11. Any American soldier who refuses to fight or who deserts in war should be shot for being a coward and a traitor.	_____

12. The men who fought in the Vietnam War did so because they were very patriotic. _____

13. "The only heroes in war are the dead ones." _____

14. Those who avoid the draft or desert and go to some other country should never be given amnesty or allowed to return to the United States. _____

15. When Vietnam veterans returned from the war, most Americans treated them as returning heroes. _____

16. Most American soldiers participated in acts of brutality against Vietnamese civilians. _____

Adapted from Kahn, Elizabeth A., Carolyn Calhoun Walter, and Larry R. Johannessen. *Writing About Literature*, ERIC/NCTE, 22-25.

Character Analysis

VALUES:

1. Acceptance (Approval from others)
2. Achievement
3. Aesthetics
4. Altruism
5. Autonomy
6. Companionship (Friendship)
7. Creativity
8. Health
9. Honesty
10. Justice
11. Knowledge
12. Love
13. Loyalty
14. Morality
15. Physical Appearance
16. Pleasure
17. Power
18. Recognition
19. Religious Faith
20. Self-respect
21. Skill
22. Wealth

Character Analyzed _____

	Character's Values Early in the Work	If the character changes, Values Near the End
What does the character value *most?* List his/her top three values *in order.*	1. _____	1. _____
	2. _____	2. _____
	3. _____	3. _____
What does the character value *least?* List his/her bottom three values *in order.*	20. _____	20. _____
	21. _____	21. _____
	22. _____	22. _____

Be prepared to present **reasons** and **evidence** for your choices.

Adapted from Kahn, Elizabeth A., Carolyn Calhoun Walter, and Larry R. Johannessen. *Writing About Literature.* ERIC/NCTE, 1984, pp. 28-32.

Evidence Extract--Supporting Claims

Thesis(claim): Early in *Fields of Fire*, the character of Lieutenant Robert E. Lee Hodges values honor (to the warrior culture he grew up a part of) above all else.

The student who wrote this thesis ranked "honor" as Hodges' #1 value early in the novel.

A. The following is a list of possible evidence that this student has generated to support the thesis. Circle the number of the statements that would provide <u>specific</u> and <u>persuasive</u> evidence for the thesis. Which of these are not specific and/or persuasive? Explain your responses.

1. Hodges is described in the novel as having "unreasoned pride" and being a "man of honor."

2. "He did not quit on the long runs or the terrible conditioning hikes because endurance involved pride and pride was honor and he was nothing if he did not retain his honor" (35).

3. "It [honor, duty, pride] became a religion to him" (33).

4. Hodges believed that man's highest moment is the one spent in battle. Even though some question their duty to serve except on their own terms, he fought because his family always had. It did not matter who they fought (25).

5. After the night ambush of Nam An (2), Snake tells Hodges that he did a nice job on the artillery. Hodges replies, "You ain't seen nothing yet" (96).

6. His second night at An Hoa, Hodges watched his company in a fire fight feeling slightly "obscene" and "washed with a mix of helplessness and fear" (51-52).

7. "It was a continuum, a litany. Pride. Courage. Fear. An inherited right to violence and the pride accumulated, even as the reasons themselves grew more amorphous" (31).

8. He had been drilled from the time he was a young boy by his mother about the Hodges men in war. To him, he wouldn't be a true Hodges if he didn't go to war.

9. "He was rawboned and rough-edged and quiet. He emanated a stringy, acquiescent toughness, born out of a need to accept hard living and disappointments" (25).

B. **What other evidence in the first part of the novel might someone point to, if he or she were arguing that Hodges does <u>not</u> value honor above all else.**

C. **Write a thesis stating what you believe Hodges comes to value <u>most</u> by the end of the novel.**

_____

_____

D. Give three (3) <u>specific</u> and <u>persuasive</u> pieces of evidence to support your thesis (claim).

Warrant Workout

Thesis: During his tour of duty in Vietnam, Senator (Goodrich) values morality above all else.

Each of the following quotations or example could be used to support the above thesis. After each, in a sentence or two, explain *how* it supports this claim. Your sentences should be written so that they could be included in a paragraph of evidence supporting the writer's thesis.

1. After Senator shot the mamasan, he was careful about not shooting unless he was absolutely certain it was the enemy. On a patrol near an isolated village, he would not shoot at the fleeing enemy because they looked like women and children. Hodges tells him to "put out rounds." Goodrich replies, "Those are kids lieutenant. Kids and mamasans." Hodges again orders him to fire. So he thinks to himself, "He can court-martial me for not shooting, but he can't court-martial me for being a lousy shot" (157).

2. When the team decides to kill the man and woman who may be responsible for killing two of their friends on Go Noi Island, Goodrich refuses to go along with it. He argues that he did not come on the patrol to kill civilians. Snake says, "Well, Senator. We're gonna do what we think we have to. You do what you think you have to." The narrator writes that "Goodrich walked quickly away. He heard Snake count behind him. . . . Shots cut through the heavy air. A lot of shots. Goodrich held his head. He felt wronged, humiliated. He had told them not to and they had not listened" (294).

3. Senator feels compassion for the "sickly and unwashed" children he sees at the Village of Phu Phong (4). He tells Speedy, "I just can't help feeling sorry for them. . . . I still can't help it. I meant it. None of this is *their* fault" (90-91).

4. When the company is within the safety of a two-day perimeter, he sees a group of village children "staring numbly at him like four dirty, stolid statues. He felt like helping them." He makes a deal with them--if they help him wash himself in the village well, he will wash them and give them food. "He was under orders not to give food to civilians, but he didn't care anymore" (174).

For each piece of evidence you gave in Evidence Extract for what **Hodges** values most by the end of the novel, write a sentence or two to explain *how* it supports your claim.

Composition Planning Sheet

Assignment: Select either the character of Hodges, Snake, or Senator (Goodrich) and write a composition in which you explain how the character's values change and why. Your thesis statement might explain what the character values most in the beginning of the novel, what the character values most at or near the end, and the reason(s) for the change in values.

Sample Thesis
At the beginning of James Webb's *Fields of Fire*, Lieutenant Robert E. Lee Hodges values honor, but after months in the bush leading his platoon, he is more concerned with loyalty to his men.

Before attempting to formulate a thesis, fill out the "Character Analysis" for the character's values.

THESIS:

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List **specific** evidence for the character's top value at the beginning.

EVIDENCE	EXPLANATION of how the evidence supports the thesis

List **specific** evidence for the character's top value at or near the end.

EVIDENCE	EXPLANATION of how the evidence supports the thesis

Explain what **causes** this change in values and list supporting **evidence**.

CHECK SHEET

Name of Writer_____

Name of evaluator(s)_____

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1. Does the writer have a clearly stated thesis that follows the directions of the assignment? YES NO

2. Does the writer provide at least 3 pieces of specific, convincing evidence for the character's top value at the beginning? YES NO

3. Does the writer clearly explain how each piece of evidence supports his/her thesis? YES NO

4. Does the writer provide at least 3 pieces of specific, convincing evidence for the character's top value at the end? YES NO

5. Does the writer clearly explain how each piece of evidence supports his/her thesis? YES NO

6. Does the writer explain the reason(s) for the character's change in values? YES NO

7. Does the writer provide specific evidence to support what he/she gives as reasons for the change? YES NO

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8. Reread the paper and mark any places where you think the writer needs to correct spelling, punctuation, capitalization, usage, etc.

9. What arguments can you think of that might be used against this writer's thesis (claim)?

Memories of Days Gone By

In James Webb's *Fields of Fire*, the character of Will Goodrich, nicknamed "Senator," is a soldier who throughout his tour of duty in Vietnam is unable to understand or rationalize his feelings concerning the war and the men he serves with. Early in novel, Senator's most important value is morality, regardless of the circumstances. By the end, however, it is loyalty that becomes most meaningful to him. There are several reasons for this change, but the primary cause is the death of New Mac, which Senator feels personally responsible for.

Early in the novel, and throughout his time in Vietnam, Senator values morality above all other things. For example, he feels compassion for the "sickly and unwashed" children he sees in the village of Phu Phong (4) (90). While at the village, refilling his canteen at a well, he turns to one of his comrades and says, "I just can't help feeling sorry for them .... None of this is *their* fault" (90-1). He is reminded by his companion that "None of this is *our* fault, either" (91). Still he feels morally responsible, somehow, for their wretched condition. It's just not right that these children should be so wronged, according to Senator. Much later in the novel, while within the safety of a "two-day perimeter" (171), he sees another group of village children, "staring numbly at him like four dirty, stolid statues. He felt like helping them" (174). Senator makes a deal with the children--if they help him wash himself at the village well, he will wash them and give them food. He does this even though "he was under orders not to give food to cililians" because it would likely end up aiding the enemy. Senator defies the order, with the excuse that "he didn't care anymore" (174). In reality, Senator defies the order because he feels it is his moral duty to aid these helpless children. His morality is the driving force behind his action.

Senator's sense of morality is so strong that it prevents him from performing his duty as a soldier. For example, a couple of months after Senator accidentally wounds and nearly kills a village woman, Hodges orders him to shoot at what appear to be villagers fleeing toward No-Name Ridge, Senator replies, "Those are kids, Lieutenant. Kids and mamasans" (157). He cannot accept the idea that they may be the enemy. He fires his "weapon perfunctorily in the general direction of the fleeing mob. [He thinks,] What the hell. He can court-martial me for not shooting, but he can't court-martial me for being a lousy shot" (157). Senator's strong moral beliefs coupled with his naivete regarding the reality of the situation--the fleeing figures are enemy soldiers disguised as villagers--prevent him from performing his duty as a soldier.

What Senator does after the incident on Go Noi Island is the most telling example of the importance he places on morality. When the company returns to An Hoa [the rear], Senator decides that he must report the

incident to the Regimental Legal Officer. Members of Senator's squad had killed two Viet Cong suspects who may have been responsible for or at least involved in the murders of Baby Cakes and Ogre. Senator believes the killings were murder. As he walks to the legal office, he thinks about "the killings" and concludes,

> But if I ignore this, how can I ever face myself, much less anyone else? . . . We can't play God. We can't administer street justice--what the hell: bush justice--to every Vietnamese who pisses us off (335).

In other words, Senator's strong sense of morality will not permit him to "ignore" the killings. as he reasons,

> . . . there's no way to justify murder. The rules say kill, O.K. but when the rules say stop, you've got to stop. We're not God. We're not barbarians (335).

Here again, it is Senator's strong sense of morality that causes him to come forward and also prevents him from seeing that what happened on Go Noi Island was probably not murder, or as the legal officer says, "It's not exactly your clear-cut case" (340).

It is evident that Senator considers morality his most important value throughout his tour in Vietnam. It is not until he returns home that any change in values is evident. It becomes apparent that what he has come to value most is loyalty--loyalty to the memory of the men he served with in the bush--and that which he valued least while in Vietnam. For example, shortly after he gets out of the hospital, Senator has a talk with his father about Vietnam and tells him,

> I have some good memories. I have some bad memories. But I do have some good ones. I even miss it, in a way (393).

This is a surprising comment from a man who once put jelly on his "gook-sores" in the hope that they would get infected and he would get sent to the rear and away from the men in his platoon who lacked his "maturity" and "moral principles" (335). What "good" memories could Senator possibly have about Vietnam and what could he possibly "miss" even a little bit? The narrator explains:

> Surprisingly, he found himself most often inside the pages of his Vietnam scrap book. He had put it together in the hospital, spending whole dull days sorting out the stacks of Instamatic photos, placing them in their proper chronology, identifying grinning, youthful faces

> and writing names underneath the photos. . . . And the friends. Yes, friends. . . . And on every page he saw himself. Or what he used to be. . . . And them. He would gaze at the pictures of them noting all the penned in names of dead men, lamenting their loss and so lamenting himself (394).

It is evident here that this is a changed Goodrich. He no longer considers himself morally superior to the men he served with; instead, he sees himself as being one of them and he thinks of them as his "friends."

Senator is able to show his loyalty to the men he served with at an anti-war rally on the campus of Harvard University. Senator is asked to speak to a large crowd and tell them, "how [bad] it was in the Nam. How senseless the killings were. The whole immorality bit" (406). When Senator arrives at the rally, he sees the Viet Cong flag raised and hears the crowd chanting, "HO! HO! HO CHI MINH! THE N.L.F. IS GONNA WIN!" (406) Standing "isolated on the stage," the chanting seems to mock the memory of those Senator left behind in Vietnam, and he thinks,

> And a thousand corpses rotted in Arizona.
> And a hundred ghosts increased his haunted agony.
> Snake, Baby Cakes and Hodges, all the others peered down from uneasy, wasted rest and called upon the Senator to Set The Bastards Straight. And those others, Bagger, Cannonball, and Cat Man, now wronged by a culture gap that overrode any hint of generational divide (406).

For Senator this is his moment of truth. The dead and wounded he served with are demanding that he tell the truth about the war. Senator knew what the students wanted to hear and what he was expected to say, but his shouted response reveals that Senator is now motivated by loyalty rather than a misguided sense of morality that simply did not work in the bush of Vietnam:

> . . . HOW MANY OF YOU ARE GOING TO GET HURT IN VIETNAM? I DIDN'T SEE ANY OF YOU IN VIETNAM. I SAW DUDES, MAN. DUDES. AND TRUCK DRIVERS AND COAL MINERS AND FARMERS. I DIDN'T SEE YOU. WHERE WERE YOU? FLUNKING YOUR DRAFT PHYSICALS? WHAT DO YOU CARE IF IT ENDS? YOU WON'T GET HURT" (409).

Senator's verbal assault on the values of the college students at the anti-war rally indicates that he is now motivated by loyalty to the memory of the men he served with in Vietnam. The microphone was ripped out of his hands, and as he left the speaker's platform, passing angry and hostile

stares, he smiled and thought, "Snake would have loved it, would have grooved on the whole thing. Senator, he would have said, you finally grew some balls" (410). This was Senator's way of repaying the loyalty that was given to him without question while he was in Vietnam.

Senator's change in values was brought about mostly by the killing of New Mac which Senator feels was his fault. Senator recounts the story of New Mac's death to the two students who ask him to speak at the anti-war rally. He tells them,

> A little babysan sucked me right out into the open so the NVA could start an ambush. I was a team leader. I had a kid who was going to shoot her. I knocked his rifle down. Just in time to see him shot in the face. Do you know how it feels to know you caused that. I'll see his face staring at that babysan for the rest of my life. . . . If I hadn't had the shit blown out of me, it would have given me great pleasure to hunt that little girl down and blow her away (407).

This is a very different Senator speaking than the one who refused to fire on fleeing figures because they looked like innocent villagers (157). Senator is admitting that it was his sense of morality that resulted in the death of New Mac. More importantly, he now realizes what the other men knew all along: that his loyalty belonged to those he served with, to those who were loyal to him. By saying that he would have hunted the little girl down and killed her, Senator is indicating that it is this incident more than anything else that brought about his change in values.

Senator entered the war with a strong sense of right and wrong, which he tries to apply to what he sees and experiences in Vietnam. His sense of morality blocks his ability to be an effective soldier, motivates him to turn in Snake and the guys for what he thinks is a case of murder, and even causes him to make a critical mistake in combat that results in the death of New Mac. As a result of this incident, Senator comes to realize the true meaning of loyalty. He learns to value loyalty to the men he served with, and at the anti-war rally he repays some of the loyalty the men showed to him.